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Settler Colonialism

## The Times of Settler Colonialism

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**ABSTRACT** Response to J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "A Structure, Not an Event: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity," published in *Lateral* 5.1. Gniadek approaches settler colonialism via questions of time—asking When is settler colonialism?—which reveals how narratives of national belonging tend to operate, as narrative confrontations that facilitate violence throughout and across time.

Settler colonialism is often conceived of as a problem of space—of conflicting, violent claims to territory, and the differing ideologies upholding those claims. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's attention to Patrick Wolfe's much quoted articulation of settler colonialism as "a structure not an event" in her call to make indigeneity a sustained part of conversations about settler colonialism reminds us, however, that settler colonialism is also a problem of time.<sup>1</sup> "Understanding settler colonialism as a structure exposes the fact that colonialism cannot be relegated to the past," writes Kauanui, "even though the past-present should be historicized."<sup>2</sup> This point reinforces Wolfe's own articulation of the relationship between his use of "structure" and "settler colonialism's temporal dimension" in the essay that Kauanui primarily draws from: "It is both as complex social formation and as continuity through time that I term settler colonization a structure rather than an event," writes Wolfe.<sup>3</sup> And later in the essay, he argues, "When invasion is recognized as a structure rather than an event, its history does not stop."<sup>4</sup> Distinguishing the "isolated event" from a notion of "structural complexity" that invokes the idea of duration, Wolfe, and following him Kauanui, emphasizes that to understand settler colonialism as a structure is to understand it as a system of relations in time and across time.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of recognizing the ongoing, "enduring" nature of structures of settler colonialism and indigeneity cannot be overstated. But Kauanui's focus on Wolfe's phrase ("structure not an event") can also help us to open up other questions about time as it relates to settler colonialism—questions about time that highlight not only how histories of invasion do not stop, but also how settler colonialism is defined by multiple, overlapping temporalities. Questions about the temporal dimensions of settler colonialism as represented in historical texts and materials motivate my own work in nineteenth-century American literature and culture, and in what follows I'd like to briefly suggest that one way to extend Kauanui's provocation regarding structures of settler colonialism and "enduring indigeneity" is to ask the question: "When is settler colonialism?"

"Where is settler colonialism?" is, in many ways, a more familiar and obvious question, in keeping with our understanding of settler colonialism as a problem of competing claims to territory. Indeed, despite the increasing attention to settler colonialism in US contexts, the question of whether US geographies can accurately be described as settler colonial spaces still seems to circulate. For example, a seminar in which I participated at the 2016

C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists conference acknowledged that settler colonialism has recently become a popular way to explain “nineteenth and twentieth-century imperial formations around the globe” and set out to consider “the usefulness of [the settler colonial] model in a North American context.” “Was there settler colonialism in North America,” the seminar call for papers queried, “and if so, where?”<sup>6</sup>

In the ensuing seminar discussion, the urgency of the question of where the model of settler colonialism might be applied geographically seemed to be tied to where particular scholars located their disciplinary home (History, Literary Studies, etc.). Some were more concerned than others with whether or not conceptions of settler colonialism deployed in Commonwealth countries accommodated US histories. But whether individual participants in the seminar were inclined to view settler colonialism as applicable to US space or not, as a method or theory, or a discourse or practice, many seemed to agree that adding “when?” to the questions “where?” and “who?” seemed useful, in part to emphasize settler colonialism as both a historical process and as something ongoing.

In asking not “where” but “when is settler colonialism?” then, I want to highlight the disruptive temporal potential embedded in recognizing settler colonialism as a structure that needs to be considered in relation to questions of indigeneity. Kauanui suggests such reconfigurations, for example, when she writes that “The notion that colonialism is something that ends with the dissolving of the British colonies when the original thirteen became the early US states has its counterpart narrative in the myth that indigenous peoples ended when colonialism ended.”<sup>7</sup> Part of acknowledging that settler colonialism and indigeneity endure is acknowledging how they transcend the temporal boundaries sometimes placed upon them. But I want to highlight how the temporal dimensions of settler colonialism involve movement in multiple directions and how recognizing the multiple temporal nodes of settler colonialism might point to additional ways for disciplines to speak to each other around reconceptions of temporalities.

Of course, one place where the multiple temporalities of settler colonialism are evident is in the historical narratives crafted to attempt to legitimate settler claims, to legitimate settler occupation of North American spaces while negotiating evidence of other times and claims to those spaces. In the nineteenth century the Mound Builder myth, for example, explained the archaeological evidence of past civilizations by suggesting the existence of earlier agrarian people who had been replaced by contemporary, nomadic indigenous groups. According to this line of thinking, present-day indigenous peoples were not the original inhabitants of North America, so US Indian removal policies could be more easily justified.<sup>8</sup>

In a related vein, Annette Kolodny has recently explored what she calls “The Politics of Prehistory” in her discussion of how the Vinland sagas, two medieval Icelandic tales, were deployed to create narratives of belonging for US settlers. In Kolodny’s account, stories about territorial discoveries and legacies (Vikings or Columbus? When and where?) are always linked to questions about who really “belongs” in US national space—to “our understanding of who we think we are as Americans.”<sup>9</sup> By appropriating accounts of long-ago encounters with North American spaces, settlers from the colonial through the national period negotiated their own sense of belonging in spaces always already inhabited by others.

These are just two examples of how the structures of settler colonialism include violent Euro-American claims on geographic space—on territory—but also include narrative confrontations with multiple temporalities. These temporalities emerge from the pasts of a place as they are encountered in a present moment, as well as from within historical narratives crafted as settlers work to claim belonging that is simultaneously never

belonging. In other words, these examples remind us that the structures of settler colonialism not only endure, but in their most fundamental manifestations are always moving between pasts, presents, and imagined futures.

In other cases, paying attention to the times of settler colonialism allows us to situate the ongoing nature of settler colonialism within a *longue durée* that can help us to re-think periodization across disciplinary boundaries. Kauanui offers some examples of how settler colonial pasts play out in our contemporary moment, and I want to turn, briefly, to another example that helps us to look to narratives about distant pasts to trace conversations about identity and belonging, allowing us to integrate much longer histories and various temporalities into conversations about the structures of settler colonialism. The Kennewick Man is one of North America's most notorious recent archaeological finds. In July 1996, two college students came across a skull on the banks of the Columbia River in Washington State. Police discovered more bones in the area, and the coroner called a local forensic anthropologist who initially noted that the skeleton "was physically distinct from skeletons of American Indians of the last several thousand years."<sup>10</sup> Based on these physical differences the anthropologist, James Chatters, initially imagined that the skeleton was that of an early European trader or settler. This assumption was complicated, however, by the presence of a cascade point, a spear point used by Paleo-Indians, embedded in the pelvis. The temporal complication presented by the cascade point was resolved when radiocarbon dating of a bone fragment revealed the skeleton to be approximately 9,500 years old, making it one of the most complete ancient skeletons ever found. Clearly, these were not the remains of a European colonial settler.

The discovery of the Kennewick Man brought a very distant past into contact with the present, and the remains quickly generated significant controversy about relationships between past and present in a settler colonial context. The US Army Corps of Engineers claimed authority over the bones since they were found on Corps land ceded by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation under an 1855 treaty. But according to the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), human remains could be returned to an indigenous group demonstrating "cultural affiliation" with those remains. A number of Native American groups filed for repatriation of the remains. Eight scientists filed a suit challenging the repatriation, arguing that the remains were too old to be affiliated with any current Native American group and that the Kennewick Man is a human ancestor who belongs to all of us—to the American public. Other special-interest groups also entered the fray. For example, a California-based neo-Norse group called the Asatru Folk Assembly filed their own suit, claiming the Kennewick Man as their ancestor. And individuals filed claims too. "I've looked at that mountain most of my life. And I imagine he looked at that mountain too," proclaims one local Washington claimant in a television interview, imagining a place-based, spiritual, if not an ancestral or biological tie to the skeleton.<sup>11</sup> Other individuals who filed claims did so in part to highlight what they perceived to be the absurdity of asserting kinship with nearly 10,000 year-old bones. Indeed, morphological studies of the skeleton showed Kennewick Man to be atypical of any modern people, raising questions about possession of remains and their belonging to place, and about when fossilized bones cannot be affiliated with any particular group. And in 2004, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a ruling that the skeleton could not be determined to be related to any living indigenous group so that NAGPRA did not apply. More recently, however, a study published in *Nature* asserts that genetic analysis of the Kennewick Man's DNA reveals the remains to be "closer to modern Native Americans than to any other population worldwide," reopening the possibility for reburial under NAGPRA.<sup>12</sup>

At the heart of these ongoing and complex controversies are complications surrounding science and indigenous claims to belonging, identity, and kinship. But these controversies also draw attention, in rather extreme ways, to the many, long temporalities at play in the settler colonial context—in this case temporalities that extend back nearly 10,000 years. The temporal dimensions of settler colonialism are multiple, syncopated, and move in many different directions. While settler colonialism and indigeneity endure, they do so in relation to many times. Some of the attempts to “claim” the Kennewick Man in the name of humanity, science, and nationalism over the last twenty years have reproduced nineteenth-century revisions and appropriations of distant pasts, in part to attempt to legitimate claims on space. Indigenous claims of kinship, on the other hand, have highlighted the long timeframes underlying questions of settler appropriations. At the risk of a historically imprecise, broad provocation, my point here is simply that in addition to considering how settler colonialism and indigeneity endure into the present as Kauanui argues, we might also consider distant pasts, the historical narratives crafted to contain them, and the many temporalities at play in the question “When is settler colonialism?” Considering the many “whens” of settler colonialism can help us to unsettle our engagement with its structures across disciplines.

## Notes

1. Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 388. [↗](#)
2. J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, “‘A structure, not an event’: Settler Colonialism and Enduring Indigeneity,” *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016), <http://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-settler-colonialism-enduring-indigeneity-kauanui/>. [↗](#)
3. Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism,” 403; 390. [↗](#)
4. Ibid., 402. [↗](#)
5. Ibid., 399. [↗](#)
6. Amy S. Greenberg and Ari Kelman, “Settler Colonialism and Territorial Expansion.” See <http://c19conference.org/seminars/>, accessed June 9, 2016. [↗](#)
7. Kauanui, “A structure,” np. [↗](#)
8. For a similar account of the Mound Builder myth, see Melissa Gniadek, “Seriality and Settlement: Southworth, Lippard, and *The Panorama of the Monumental Grandeur of the Mississippi Valley*,” *American Literature* 86, no. 1 (March 2014): 51. [↗](#)
9. Annette Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 11. [↗](#)
10. James C. Chatters, *Ancient Encounters: Kennewick Man and the First Americans* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 41. [↗](#)
11. *Kennewick Man: An Epic Drama of the West*, directed by Kyle Carver and Ryan Purcell (New York: Filmmakers Library, 2002), DVD. [↗](#)
12. Morten Rasmussen, Martin Sikora, Anders Albrechtsen, Thorfinn Sand Korneliussen, J. Victor Moreno-Mayar, G. David Poznik, Christoph P. E. Zollikofer, Marcia S. Ponce de León, Morten E. Allentoft, Ida Moltke, Hákon Jónsson, Cristina Valdiosera, Ripan S. Malhi, Ludovic Orlando, Carlos D. Bustamante, Thomas W. Stafford Jr, David J. Meltzer, Rasmus Nielsen, and Eske Willerslev, “The Ancestry and Affiliations of Kennewick Man,” *Nature* 523 (23 July 2015): 455. [↗](#)



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